

# Symposium

## Wikipedia and participatory culture: Why fans edit

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[0.1] Abstract—Online, fans of popular culture media partake in participatory culture in various ways, such as writing fan fiction and scrutinizing media on message boards. Another way they do so is by editing relevant articles in the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. In fact, research has shown that Wikipedia articles skew heavily toward pop culture, suggesting that fans of pop culture are among the most enthusiastic of Wikipedia's editors. Of course, the question emerges: Why are pop culture fans in particular so interested in editing Wikipedia? Building on previous research, I argue that fans want to take part in the production of the media that they enjoy, that Wikipedia allows editors to create their own paratext (i.e., the Wikipedia article) in relation to a main text (e.g., a movie, a television show, a book series), and that this paratext may be heavily used by the general public. Such usage is a form of implicit approval that affirms the editors' knowledge and encourages them to make more edits. Thus, Wikipedia validates the fan editor's work in a way that other outlets for participatory culture (e.g., fan fiction, fan art, songwriting) cannot.

[0.2] Keywords—Fandom; Popular culture

Thomas, Paul. 2016. "Wikipedia and Participatory Culture: Why Fans Edit." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 22. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2016.0902>.

## **1. Introduction**

[1.1] Participatory culture is a type of relationship between producers and consumers wherein the latter takes part in the dissemination and production of a media object alongside the former.

Online, fans of popular culture media partake in participatory culture in various ways, such as composing fan fiction and scrutinizing media on message boards. Another way in which they do so is by editing relevant articles in the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. In fact, research has shown that Wikipedia articles skew heavily toward popular culture, suggesting that fans of pop culture are some of the most enthusiastic of Wikipedia's editors. Of course, the question emerges: Why are pop culture fans in particular so interested in editing Wikipedia?

[1.2] I argue here that fans want to create a paratext that will be read and that will disseminate facts about their chosen media object, and that approval of their efforts encourages them to continue. Fans favor Wikipedia over other forms of participatory culture largely because of the site's infrastructural nature, which guarantees both an audience (ensuring that the fan's work will be read and that information about a media object's canon will be successfully disseminated) and a mechanism of implicit approval. In other words, fans choose Wikipedia over other forms of participatory culture because the site is better able to both broadcast and validate their work.

## **2. On the nature of participatory culture and fandom**

[2.1] The term "participatory culture" is used to discuss the "shift in power relations" between producers and consumers, such that "fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content," rather than merely consuming it (Jenkins in Burgess and Green 2009, 10); participatory culture is thus often considered the opposite of a more "spectatorial" consumer culture (Jenkins 2006, 41). According to Jenkins et al., participatory culture has "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of information mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices" (2009, 7). Jenkins et al. note that "a participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter" (2009, 3). Redundant as it is to point out, participatory culture encourages active participation.

[2.2] Participatory culture is in many ways intertwined with fandom. Mittell defines fandom and fan culture as "existing principally in relation to another external cultural object...The key aspect for fan culture is that participants have an emotional engagement with a shared cultural form, dedicating their time, money, and creative energies to exploring that relationship" (2013, 38). Fans therefore often not merely consume but also interact with the object or objects of their affection. Today, there are myriad digital outlets (e.g., Tumblr, YouTube, Reddit, DeviantArt, and various discussion forums) that allow fans to engage with, consume, and create content, thereby taking part in participatory culture.

## **3. Enter Wikipedia**

[3.1] One manifestation of participatory culture is Wikipedia, which describes itself on its home page ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)) as "the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit."

Wikipedia fits the description of participatory culture offered by Jenkins et al.: it has a low barrier to entry (a user can edit anonymously or sign up for a free account), support for creating and sharing content (editors come together to review and constructively critique articles to certify their quality), and a mentor system ensuring that information is passed from veteran editors to novice contributors (whole Wikipedia essays exist to explicate the finer workings of the encyclopedia to a novice, and many senior editors will leave useful messages on pages created by new editors to educate them and acclimate them to the site) (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Essays>). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, editors who share information on Wikipedia believe that their contributions matter; in fact, one Wikipedia essay is titled "Editors Matter" ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Editors\\_matter](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Editors_matter)).

[3.2] Wikipedia covers a vast variety of topics: as of December 2015, the site hosted over 5 million articles, with an average of 800 new articles being created every day (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Statistics>). However, the encyclopedia's concept coverage is not uniform, and the site definitely skews toward certain topics. In "Single White Males: Systemic Bias in Wikipedia's Obsessions," Au (2015) argues that Wikipedia is edited mostly by white men, who favor articles that focus on pop culture at the expense of other, more culturally important topics ([note 1](#)). While Au paints a fairly negative portrait of the encyclopedia, his assertion that Wikipedia is heavily skewed toward pop culture is particularly important in regard to this essay, for it suggests that many of Wikipedia's most ardent editors are members of specific fandoms.

#### 4. Why do fans edit?

[4.1] Fans engage in participatory culture in a variety of ways. Why, then, do some fans favor Wikipedia over other forms of participatory culture? The answer to this question is multifaceted, and to determine it, I will examine three theories put forth by previous scholars: first, many fans are eager to create paratexts that will be read; second, many fans are interested in documenting their cultural object of interest; and third, internal self-concept motivation (that is to say, motivation that "takes the form of the individual setting internal standards that become the basis for the ideal self"; Pandey 2005, 57) generated by approval of their efforts encourages fans to continue editing.

[4.2] *Theory 1*: Mittell suggests that fans are often eager to create paratexts—"independent cultural works" (e.g. fan fiction) "that exist in relation to" main texts (e.g., a movie, a television show, a book series) (2013, 38). But these fans are not content to see their paratexts wither away in obscurity. "Fans," according to Camille Bacon-Smith, "write in order to be read, to be interpreted by a community" (quoted in Booth 2010, 36). This means that a fan-created paratext is essentially useless if no one reads it.

[4.3] *Theory 2*: According to Mittell, some fans are interested in documenting their cultural object of interest, rather than modifying or building off of it (such as through fan fiction or fan art) (2013, 38). Forte and Bruckman argue that the motivations of Wikipedia editors are similar to those of scientists: "like scientists, contributors to Wikipedia seek to collaboratively identify and publish true facts about the world" (Forte and Bruckman 2005, 1). For my purposes here,

both of these claims can be applied to fans. Scientists try to put forth facts about reality, and fans seek to put forth facts (i.e., "canon," a term I discuss below) about their media property of interest.

[4.4] *Theory 3*: Yang and Lai (2010) test four possible reasons why people continue to edit the online encyclopedia: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, external self-concept motivation, and internal self-concept motivation. On the basis of statistical analysis, they argue that when people share knowledge and receive a positive response (i.e., approval) from fellow editors, they feel validated in their knowledge and are inclined to share more. Therefore, Yang and Lai conclude that internal self-concept motivation is the most significant factor for why individuals—including fans—continue to edit Wikipedia (2010, 1382).

## **5. The infrastructural nature of Wikipedia**

[5.1] Let us assume that these theories are correct: that canon-minded fans edit Wikipedia out of a desire to put forth a fit-to-be read paratext about their media property of interest, and that they are encouraged to edit again and again by internal self-concept motivation. This does not, however, explain why they might prefer editing Wikipedia to some other form of participatory culture, such as creating YouTube videos to document the history of a fictional world, posting an article on Reddit that discusses an author's statements about the plot of a novel, or blogging on Tumblr about the backstory of a show's characters. Indeed, these are also ways in which fans can express facts about their media property of interest, and they can also receive approval, encouraging the fans to continue ([note 2](#)). However, I contend that the reason that many fans are drawn specifically toward editing lies in Wikipedia's infrastructural nature.

[5.2] John Durham Peters quotes Paul Edwards to define infrastructures as "large, force-amplifying systems that connect people and institutions across large scales of space and time" (2015, 31). Examples include both the material (e.g., dams, power plants, highways) and the virtual (e.g., the Internet). These structures require continual modifications and improvements, their inner workings are often hidden from the public, and—perhaps most importantly—they are at risk of being sabotaged or hijacked by rogues (Peters 2015, 31, 33). However, despite their size, they often disappear into the background of culture and society. This is because, as they are used more often, they are taken for granted and become banal (Peters 2015, 34). In other words, these massive structures become "mundane to the point of boredom" (Star in Peters 2015, 36) and thus fade into the "beaten paths of impercipient" (McLuhan in Peters 2015, 34). As a result, infrastructures, although massive, are often invisible to those who use them (Peters 2015, 35).

[5.3] Wikipedia is the epitome of such a platform in the digital sphere. First, it is built upon the "ethos of continual modification and improvement" (Cummings and Barton 2008, 196). Second, while the inner workings of the site are not exactly hidden from the public, they are tucked away behind tabs and hidden underneath article pages; they are not readily apparent to the layperson. Third and finally, Wikipedia is notorious for being hijacked by vandals. Thus, Wikipedia has all the trappings of a digital infrastructure.

## **6. The implications of Wikipedia's infrastructuralism**

[6.1] Why does the infrastructural nature of Wikipedia affect why fans edit? In many ways, the site holds a monopoly on knowledge (even if it is merely aggregated from other sources), and consequently, it is often a first stop during the research process. Wikipedia is where people go to verify a bit of trivia, look up a name, or confirm a date; it is a heavily used—and therefore mundane—information acquisition tool. As a result, it all too often fades into the background, despite being an extremely important sociocultural "well of knowledge" with far-reaching implications (Au 2015).

[6.2] Because of Wikipedia's infrastructural nature, millions of people unreflectively use the site. These individuals—the consumers of Wikipedia's shared knowledge—are seeking out information, and are gaining it by reading articles that fan editors had a hand in creating. In other words, when a fan edits a Wikipedia page, that edit may be seen by anywhere from a dozen to a million individuals per day. Fans' edits are being broadcast to a massive audience that is actively using the information, and their desire to create paratexts that will be read is being met. Thus, theory 1 is supported.

[6.3] Because of the site's massive audience, Wikipedia is an excellent platform for disseminating facts about a media property, or what fans call canon. In the realm of fandom, this term refers to "the complete fictional universe deemed (either by the fans or by the media creators) 'authentic,' or an accurate history of that story world" (Booth 2010, 35). There is thus a fine line between what is "canon" and what is "fanon" (a portmanteau of "fan" and "canon"), the latter a term that denotes beliefs about a media property that are commonly shared by fans but unsupported (even if not contradicted) by the property itself. Wikipedia does not allow articles to include made-up or unsourced information, and thus they almost never contain fanon (Mittell 2013, 38–39, 41). Consequently, because fanon is not allowed on Wikipedia, it follows that those who edit the encyclopedia are more likely to care about collecting and reproducing facts about—rather than unofficially expanding upon—a media object of interest. Therefore, other forms of participatory culture (such as writing fan fiction or drawing fan art) might not satisfy their desire to document a media object, whereas Wikipedia does. Thus theory 2 is validated.

[6.4] Finally, a very large number of Wikipedia articles are viewed almost every day; indeed, many of these articles are ones that fan editors have actively contributed to ([note 3](#)). This frequent use of the fan editor's work could therefore be seen as evidence that the public deems it informative and helpful, engendering a sense of implicit approval. Because Yang and Lai do not clearly indicate where the approval that is key to internal self-concept motivation comes from (2010, 1380–82), I contend that their argument can be modified and amended slightly: the implicit approval generated by frequent usage affirms fans' knowledge and encourages them to continue sharing it by editing Wikipedia. Thus, theory 3, while modified and extended, is for the most part supported.

[6.5] Because of its infrastructural nature, Wikipedia has both a built-in audience and a built-in mechanism for garnering approval. Some fans want to put forth readable paratexts (theory 1) containing facts about their media property of interest (theory 2), and editing Wikipedia is an efficient and effective way for them to achieve this goal; the site's implicit approval mechanism also ensures that they will continue to do so (theory 3). While other forms of participatory culture might require the same amount of knowledge and might disseminate facts about the

media properties, the paratexts that result from them may go unread (e.g., a Tumblr blog might not be viewed, a YouTube video might go unwatched, a Reddit post might not be read). They are less reliable ways of satisfying the fan editors' goals ([note 4](#)). Wikipedia is perhaps the only platform available on which fans can effectively and efficiently broadcast facts about their media objects of interest and receive built-in approval, encouraging them to continue.

## 7. Conclusion

[7.1] Fans are initially drawn to Wikipedia by a desire to create a paratext alongside the main text as well as a desire to spread facts about the media property that they care about. By providing an infrastructure, Wikipedia ensures that others will view and use articles edited by fans. This can be seen as an implicit form of approval, and this approval affirms the editors' knowledge and encourages them to make more edits. While this may also happen in other forms of participatory culture, it is less assured. Thus, Wikipedia both broadcasts and validates fan editors' work in a way that other outlets for participatory culture simply cannot.

## 8. Notes

[1.](#) Kittur, Chi, and Suh (2008) asserted that roughly 30 percent of Wikipedia's articles dealt with "culture and the arts" and 15 percent dealt with "people and self." These categories largely contained "more traditionally encyclopedic subjects" alongside "popular subjects"—that is, articles concerning pop culture topics. By contrast, "articles dealing with the 'harder' topics, such as the natural sciences, technology, and mathematics have lower representation, accounting for only 14% of all category assignments" (1511). Further research is needed to determine the exact percentage of Wikipedia articles concerned with pop culture.

[2.](#) Of course, these are not exclusive: a Wikipedia editor can dabble in fan fiction or create YouTube videos, for instance. However, many members of a participatory culture seem to prefer expressing themselves in a particular way. This paper focuses on those who favor Wikipedia over other outlets.

[3.](#) Not every page on Wikipedia is being constantly viewed by someone online. Some articles are sporadically viewed every other day, whereas others go days and weeks at a time without viewers. As such, there is a chance that a Wikipedia paratext (like other forms of participatory culture) can indeed go unread. However, because Wikipedia is so massive and so heavily trafficked, the likelihood that a fan's given edit will be seen by an audience is much higher than were they to have expressed themselves via another outlet.

[4.](#) Fans might also create readable paratexts by editing fan wikis, which are Web sites that, like Wikipedia, use the wiki markup language but are devoted to specific subjects (Mittell 2013, 38). Fan wikis, however, are not as heavily trafficked as Wikipedia and thus are unlikely to be infrastructures. As a result, they do not have a built-in audience or an intrinsic mechanism for garnering approval in the way that Wikipedia does.



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